



Constitutional values: The nub of the Indian constitution

Y S Balavantagol

Professor, Department of Studies and Research in Political Science, KRCU, Belagavi, Karnataka, India

Abstract

The Constitution of India is not merely a legal framework for establishing governmental institutions and distributing political power, it represents a transformative vision of democratic nation-building founded on justice, liberty, equality, dignity, fraternity, and constitutional morality. The present study examines constitutional values as the essential core or “nub” of the Indian Constitution and analyses their significance in shaping India’s democratic, inclusive, and socially just political order. The study explores the major constitutional values of justice, liberty, equality, fraternity, democracy, secularism, rule of law, constitutional supremacy, and respect for fundamental rights. Particular attention is given to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar’s contribution to the development of social democracy and constitutional morality, especially his emphasis on the interrelationship between liberty, equality, and fraternity. The study further examines how Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles of State Policy, Fundamental Duties, judicial review, and the basic structure doctrine translate constitutional values into institutional and social practices. It argues that constitutional democracy cannot be sustained merely through formal institutions and legal provisions, it requires a constitutional culture in which citizens, political leaders, and public institutions internalize and practice constitutional principles. The study also highlights contemporary challenges, including social inequality, caste discrimination, political polarization, majoritarianism, institutional pressures, misinformation, digital manipulation, and weak constitutional literacy. It concludes that strengthening civic and constitutional education, protecting minority rights and individual freedoms, ensuring institutional accountability, promoting social equality, and fostering responsible digital citizenship are essential for realizing constitutional values in everyday democratic life. Ultimately, constitutional values constitute the philosophical foundation and democratic conscience of the Indian Constitution and remain central to the continuing project of building an inclusive, just, and democratic India.

Keywords: Constitution of India, constitutional values, constitutional morality, justice, liberty

Introduction

The Constitution of India is not merely a legal framework for establishing governmental institutions and distributing powers among the organs of the State; it is a vision of social transformation and democratic nation-building. Framed in the aftermath of colonial rule and within a society marked by caste hierarchy, social exclusion, economic inequality, communal divisions and widespread poverty, the Constitution sought to create a political order founded on justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. Its deeper purpose was to transform the idea of citizenship from one based on inherited status and social hierarchy to one based on equal dignity and constitutional rights. Constitutional values constitute the philosophical and moral foundation of the Indian Constitution. They provide meaning and direction to its institutions, rights and democratic procedures. The Preamble gives their clearest expression by resolving to secure social, economic and political justice; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and opportunity; and fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the nation. These values are further reflected in the Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles of State Policy, Fundamental Duties and the institutional structure of the Constitution. The significance of constitutional values lies in their transformative character. They seek not merely to restrain State power but also to reshape social relations and create conditions in which democracy becomes meaningful in everyday life. Equality challenges inherited forms of discrimination; liberty protects individual autonomy; justice seeks to overcome structural inequalities; fraternity

promotes social solidarity; and constitutional morality requires public institutions and citizens to respect the spirit of democratic constitutionalism. In this sense, constitutional values establish a balance between individual freedom and collective welfare, political democracy and social justice, and national unity and diversity. The Indian constitutional vision is particularly significant in a society characterized by immense religious, linguistic, cultural, regional and social diversity. Constitutional values provide a common democratic framework within which these differences can coexist without compromising equal citizenship. They ensure that majority rule does not become majoritarian domination and that national unity is pursued through constitutional equality rather than social or cultural uniformity.

The contemporary relevance of these values is therefore undeniable. Challenges such as social discrimination, economic inequality, political polarization, institutional pressures, intolerance and the misuse of digital platforms demonstrate that constitutional democracy cannot survive through constitutional provisions alone. It requires a constitutional culture in which citizens, political leaders and institutions internalize the principles of justice, liberty, equality, dignity and fraternity. Thus, constitutional values may rightly be regarded as the “nub” or essential core of the Indian Constitution. They are the principles that connect the constitutional text with its larger vision of a democratic, inclusive and socially just India. The enduring strength of the Republic ultimately depends not only upon preserving these values in law but upon translating them into lived realities of citizenship and governance.

Background of the Study

The background of India's constitutional values is rooted in the historical experiences of colonial rule and the deep social inequalities of pre-independence India. Although colonialism introduced modern institutions such as legislatures, courts and legal systems, political rights remained limited, while caste discrimination, untouchability, gender inequality, poverty and unequal access to education continued to shape Indian society. The makers of the Constitution therefore faced the dual task of establishing political democracy and social transformation.

The Constitution sought to create a democratic order based on equal citizenship, irrespective of caste, religion, gender, region or social status. In this transformative vision, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar played a pivotal role. As Chairman of the Drafting Committee, he emphasized that political democracy could not endure without social democracy. His emphasis on liberty, equality and fraternity, together with the idea of constitutional morality, highlighted the need to transform constitutional principles into social realities.

The Constituent Assembly debates further reveal the effort to reconcile individual liberty with social justice, majority rule with constitutional limitations, and national unity with diversity. Thus, constitutional values emerged as the philosophical foundation connecting the constitutional text with its broader objective of establishing a democratic, egalitarian and inclusive society.

Constitutional Values as the Foundation of the Indian Constitutional Order

Constitutional values may be understood as the principles that determine the moral direction of constitutional governance. Constitutional provisions provide institutional and legal mechanisms, whereas constitutional values provide the purposes that those mechanisms are expected to serve. The Constitution establishes a parliamentary system, federal relations between the Union and States, an independent judiciary, fundamental rights, directive principles, electoral institutions and mechanisms of accountability. Yet these institutions cannot function democratically merely because they exist formally. Their functioning must remain consistent with the values of constitutionalism. The Constitution consequently represents a combination of constitutional power and constitutional restraint. It gives authority to institutions while simultaneously limiting that authority. Parliament possesses legislative power, but it cannot exercise that power in violation of constitutional limitations. The executive exercises administrative authority, but its actions remain subject to law and judicial review. The judiciary possesses constitutional authority, but it too operates within the constitutional framework. The principle of constitutional supremacy ensures that public power remains subordinate to the Constitution. This relationship between authority and limitation constitutes one of the most important features of constitutional democracy. The Constitution does not merely ask, "Who governs?" It also asks, "How should power be exercised?" and "What limits should exist on public power?"

Justice: The Transformative Core

Justice occupies a foundational position in the constitutional philosophy of India. The Preamble speaks of social, economic and political justice. The inclusion of these three

dimensions demonstrates that the Constitution was not designed merely to establish political democracy but also to address structural inequalities. Social justice seeks to dismantle discriminatory social structures and establish equality of status and dignity. Constitutional provisions abolishing untouchability, prohibiting discrimination and permitting affirmative measures for disadvantaged groups demonstrate the transformative character of Indian constitutionalism. Economic justice recognizes that political rights become incomplete when extreme economic inequalities prevent citizens from meaningfully exercising their freedoms. The Directive Principles of State Policy seek to promote welfare, reduce inequalities and establish conditions conducive to social and economic democracy. Political justice implies equal participation in the political process. Universal adult suffrage was therefore a revolutionary constitutional decision. India adopted political equality on an enormous scale despite widespread poverty and illiteracy. The constitutional commitment to justice demonstrates that democracy cannot be reduced to periodic elections. A democracy must also address unequal social relationships and unequal access to opportunities.

Liberty: Protecting Individual Freedom

Liberty is another central constitutional value. The Preamble recognizes liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship. Fundamental Rights provide concrete legal protection for various forms of individual freedom. Freedom of expression is particularly significant because democratic government depends upon the ability of citizens to criticize public institutions and participate in political debate. Without freedom of expression, elections alone cannot constitute meaningful democracy. However, constitutional liberty is not absolute. The Constitution balances individual freedoms with legitimate interests such as public order, security, morality and the rights of others. This balance illustrates an important feature of constitutionalism: liberty must be protected without transforming individual freedom into an instrument for denying the freedom and dignity of others. The contemporary importance of liberty has increased with the expansion of digital communication. Social media and digital platforms have expanded opportunities for political expression while simultaneously creating new challenges involving misinformation, hate speech, privacy and manipulation. Constitutional values therefore have to be applied to emerging technological contexts without abandoning their fundamental commitment to individual freedom.

Equality: From Formal Equality to Substantive Equality

Equality represents one of the most significant transformative principles of the Indian Constitution. Article 14 establishes equality before law and equal protection of laws, while Articles 15 and 16 prohibit discrimination in specified contexts and permit affirmative measures for historically disadvantaged groups. Indian constitutionalism does not treat equality as simply identical treatment. Where historical discrimination has created structural disadvantages, treating everyone identically may perpetuate inequality. Consequently, the Constitution permits affirmative action and special provisions designed to promote substantive equality. The constitutional approach to equality is particularly relevant in a society historically characterized by caste-based exclusion. Ambedkar's

constitutional philosophy recognized that political democracy could not become socially meaningful when individuals continued to experience profound inequalities in everyday life. Equality therefore has at least three dimensions: equality before law, equality of opportunity and equality of social dignity. The constitutional project remains incomplete if any one of these dimensions is ignored.

Fraternity and the Dignity of the Individual

Fraternity is perhaps the most socially transformative and least adequately understood constitutional value. The Preamble connects fraternity directly with the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the nation. Fraternity suggests that citizenship cannot be sustained exclusively through legal rules. Citizens must recognize one another as equals possessing equal dignity. In a diverse society, fraternity becomes essential for maintaining social cohesion. Ambedkar placed particular importance on fraternity because he understood the dangers of a society divided by caste and social hierarchy. Political equality cannot survive when society is organized around ideas of superior and inferior human beings. Fraternity therefore requires respect for differences without allowing difference to become a basis for discrimination. It encourages citizens to regard constitutional citizenship as a shared identity that exists alongside linguistic, religious, regional and cultural identities.

Democracy as a Constitutional Value

Democracy is both a system of government and a constitutional value. The Indian Constitution establishes representative institutions, regular elections, parliamentary accountability and political participation. Yet democracy is broader than the electoral process. A democratic culture requires tolerance of disagreement, respect for opposition, freedom of expression, institutional accountability and willingness to accept constitutional limitations. Democracy becomes vulnerable when political majorities regard electoral victory as unlimited authority. Constitutional democracy requires a distinction between majority rule and majority domination. A government may possess electoral legitimacy while still being constitutionally obligated to protect minorities and individual rights. The Constitution consequently transforms democracy from a simple principle of majority decision-making into a system of government limited by rights, institutions and constitutional morality.

Secularism and Freedom of Religion

Indian secularism is closely associated with constitutional equality and freedom of conscience. The Constitution protects religious freedom while simultaneously maintaining the authority of the State to regulate secular activities associated with religion and to undertake social reform.

The Indian model therefore seeks to maintain principled constitutional neutrality while protecting the religious freedoms of individuals and communities. Secularism is especially important in a society characterized by religious diversity. Constitutional secularism does not require citizens to abandon their religious identities; rather, it seeks to ensure that the State does not deny equal citizenship on the basis of religious identity.

Rule of Law and Constitutional Supremacy

The rule of law is one of the fundamental principles of constitutional government. It means that public authority

must operate within the framework of law and that individuals and institutions are subject to constitutional limitations. The Supreme Court identifies constitutional supremacy, judicial review, and equality before law and separation of powers among the important characteristics of India's constitutional system. The rule of law protects citizens from arbitrary exercise of power. It also ensures that political authority is not transformed into personal authority. Constitutional supremacy therefore requires every institution of government to recognize that its authority originates from and remains limited by the Constitution.

Fundamental Rights and Constitutional Values

Fundamental Rights constitute one of the principal mechanisms through which constitutional values are translated into enforceable legal guarantees. The importance of Fundamental Rights lies in their ability to protect individuals against arbitrary State action. They create a constitutional sphere within which citizens possess protected freedoms and equal legal status.

Articles 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21 and 25, among others, demonstrate how constitutional values are transformed into enforceable rights. Article 17 is particularly significant because it constitutionally abolishes untouchability. It represents the Constitution's direct intervention against a historically entrenched social practice. Article 21, through its evolving judicial interpretation, has become central to the protection of life, personal liberty and human dignity. The constitutional understanding of dignity has expanded considerably through judicial interpretation, illustrating how constitutional values can develop in response to changing social circumstances. Fundamental Rights therefore function not only as legal protections but also as instruments of social transformation.

Directive Principles and the Pursuit of Social and Economic Democracy

The Directive Principles of State Policy provide another major expression of constitutional values. Although they are not enforceable in the same manner as Fundamental Rights, they establish important responsibilities for the State. They seek to promote social welfare, reduce economic inequality, improve public health, promote education, protect workers and advance conditions necessary for a dignified life. The relationship between Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles illustrates the Constitution's attempt to reconcile individual liberty with social welfare. A purely rights-based constitutional order may protect formal freedoms while leaving structural inequalities untouched. Conversely, an exclusively welfare-oriented system may potentially compromise individual liberty. The Indian constitutional framework attempts to balance both. The Government of India's legal materials describe the Preamble, Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles as central expressions of the Constitution's fundamental values and socio-economic vision.

Fundamental Duties and Constitutional Citizenship

Constitutional values cannot be sustained solely through State institutions. Citizens also have responsibilities toward the constitutional order. Fundamental Duties emphasize respect for constitutional ideals, national unity, harmony, scientific temper, public property and the environment, among other responsibilities. The inclusion of duties reflects the idea that constitutional democracy requires responsible

citizenship. Rights and duties are therefore complementary dimensions of constitutional citizenship. A citizen who demands freedom of expression but denies others the same freedom violates the spirit of constitutionalism. Similarly, citizenship requires respect for diversity, public institutions and the dignity of fellow citizens. Constitutional values consequently require a culture of reciprocity: individuals claim rights while simultaneously respecting the constitutional rights of others.

Ambedkar and the Idea of Constitutional Morality

The idea of constitutional morality is especially important for understanding the deeper meaning of constitutional values. Ambedkar's understanding of constitutional morality went beyond mechanical obedience to constitutional provisions. It required democratic institutions and citizens to internalize constitutional principles. Constitutional morality means that public institutions must respect the Constitution even when political convenience points in another direction. It requires constitutional actors to protect rights even when those rights are unpopular. It also requires citizens to accept democratic disagreement without resorting to violence or extra-constitutional coercion. Ambedkar's warnings during the final stages of constitution-making remain particularly relevant. He cautioned against abandoning constitutional methods, excessive hero worship in politics and the failure to transform political democracy into social democracy. His concern with hero worship is especially important because constitutional democracy depends upon institutions rather than individuals. Political leaders may possess popularity, but constitutional authority must remain institutional and accountable. Constitutional morality therefore acts as a bridge between constitutional text and constitutional culture.

Constitutional Values and the Basic Structure of the Constitution

The doctrine of the basic structure, developed by the Supreme Court in *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* (1973), represents another important dimension of constitutional values.

The doctrine establishes that Parliament's power to amend the Constitution is not unlimited. Constitutional amendments cannot destroy the basic structure of the Constitution. Although the precise components of the basic structure have evolved through judicial interpretation, principles such as constitutional supremacy, rule of law, judicial review, democracy, secularism, federalism and separation of powers have been recognized as important constitutional fundamentals. The doctrine demonstrates that constitutional values operate as limits on constitutional power itself. The Constitution is therefore not merely a mechanism for exercising political power; it also protects the fundamental character of the democratic order against its destruction through formal legal procedures.

Constitutional Values and the Judiciary

The judiciary plays an important role in translating constitutional values into practical rights and principles. Through constitutional interpretation and judicial review, courts have developed the meaning of equality, liberty, dignity, privacy and other constitutional guarantees. Judicial interpretation has demonstrated that constitutional values are not frozen in the social conditions of 1950. Rather, the

Constitution possesses an interpretive capacity that allows its principles to respond to new social realities.

The development of privacy as a constitutional right, for example, illustrates the relationship between liberty, dignity and individual autonomy. Similarly, the judicial emphasis on constitutional morality in cases concerning individual rights demonstrates the continuing importance of constitutional values in resolving conflicts between individual freedom and prevailing social attitudes. The judiciary's role, however, must remain balanced. Constitutional interpretation should protect constitutional principles while respecting the institutional boundaries between the judiciary, legislature and executive.

Constitutional Values and Social Diversity

India's diversity makes constitutional values particularly important. Linguistic, religious, cultural, regional and caste differences constitute important elements of Indian society. The Constitution attempts to accommodate this diversity through federalism, cultural and educational rights, minority protections, democratic representation and equality before law.

Unity in India cannot therefore be based on cultural uniformity. Constitutional unity is better understood as unity based on equal citizenship.

The Constitution provides a common political framework within which differences can coexist. Constitutional values allow citizens to maintain diverse identities while sharing common commitments to democracy, liberty, equality and justice. This is particularly important when social or political disagreements become polarized. Constitutional values provide a common normative framework through which disagreements can be resolved peacefully.

Contemporary Challenges to Constitutional Values

Despite the constitutional commitment to justice, liberty, equality and fraternity, the realization of these values remains an ongoing process.

Social Inequality: Caste discrimination, gender inequality, economic deprivation and unequal access to education continue to challenge substantive equality. Constitutional guarantees alone cannot eliminate deeply rooted social practices unless supported by social transformation and effective public policy.

Political Polarization: Increasing political polarization can weaken fraternity and democratic deliberation. When political opponents are treated as enemies rather than legitimate participants in democratic politics, constitutional democracy becomes vulnerable.

Majoritarianism: Democracy cannot be reduced to the numerical strength of the majority. Constitutional democracy requires the protection of minority rights and individual freedoms even when political majorities disagree with them.

Institutional Accountability: Constitutional institutions must maintain independence and accountability. The effectiveness of constitutional democracy depends on the capacity of institutions to exercise their powers without arbitrary interference.

Misinformation and Digital Politics: Digital communication has transformed political participation but has also created challenges involving misinformation, hate speech, privacy and manipulation. Constitutional values therefore need to be extended into the digital sphere.

Weak Constitutional Literacy: Many citizens know the Constitution primarily as a legal document but may not be familiar with its values. Constitutional literacy must therefore move beyond memorization of Articles and provisions toward understanding justice, liberty, equality, dignity and fraternity as everyday democratic principles.

Constitutional Values as a Living Democratic Culture: The Constitution should not be understood merely as a document kept within courts, government offices or academic institutions. Its values must become part of everyday democratic culture.

A teacher who treats students equally, a public servant who rejects discrimination, a citizen who respects another person's freedom of belief, a political leader who accepts criticism, a journalist who protects democratic accountability and a judge who safeguards constitutional rights all contribute to the realization of constitutional values. Thus, constitutionalism is not exclusively a legal phenomenon. It is also a social and cultural phenomenon. The strength of a Constitution ultimately depends on the extent to which its principles become internalized by citizens and institutions. Constitutional values must therefore operate simultaneously at three levels:

Constitutional text: the formal provisions and institutional framework;

Constitutional institutions: Parliament, executive, judiciary and other democratic bodies; and

Constitutional culture: the attitudes, practices and behaviour of citizens and political actors. The Constitution becomes meaningful when these three dimensions reinforce one another.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Indian Constitution is not merely a framework of governance but a transformative vision founded on justice, liberty, equality, dignity and fraternity. These constitutional values constitute its essential core by connecting constitutional institutions and rights with the broader goal of establishing an inclusive and democratic society. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's emphasis on social democracy, constitutional morality and the inseparable relationship between liberty, equality and fraternity remains particularly relevant to this vision. In contemporary India, the effective realization of these values requires stronger constitutional literacy and civic education, transparent and accountable institutions, respect for democratic opposition and minority rights, and sustained efforts to address caste discrimination, gender inequality and social exclusion. Constitutional values should also guide responsible digital citizenship and promote fraternity and equal citizenship amid India's diversity. Ultimately, the Constitution must be understood as a living social project, whose success depends on transforming its written principles into everyday democratic practices. Thus, constitutional values remain the nub of the Indian Constitution, providing its philosophical foundation, democratic conscience and transformative purpose.

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